

O. FIONA YAP

## South Korea in 2015

### *Battling to Set the Stage for Elections*

#### ABSTRACT

The year 2015 featured real and metaphorical battles in South Korea: face-offs between the executive and the legislature saw President Park Geun-hye duel with the non-Park faction in the ruling Saenuri Party and fend off the opposition, whose alliance struggled with infighting and subsequent fractures. The government waged war against a health epidemic and exchanged artillery fire with North Korea at the Demilitarized Zone. The by-elections in April 2015 augur the political stage for pending elections in 2016 and 2017.

**KEYWORDS:** president-legislature face-off, opposition fissures, health epidemic, reforms, South Korea

THE YEAR 2015 SAW REAL AND METAPHORICAL battles in South Korea. With legislative elections looming in 2016 and presidential elections the next year, the country's executive, legislative parties and civil society fought to make their respective marks to set the stage for the impending votes, even as the government strove to pump up the economy and keep North Korea's military provocations in check.

Park Geun-hye began 2015 by battling to keep her close aides in office even as repeated scandals that mired the aides threatened to push her into ineffectual "lame duck" territory for her last two years in the presidency, which is limited to one five-year term. In that fight, the president received an unprecedented boost with the ruling Saenuri Party's three of four wins in the by-elections on April 29. Her uncanny ability to win elections intact, Park weathered the year authoritatively, staring down several efforts by the legislature to wrestle the agenda away from her office with her threats to leave the

---

O. FIONA YAP is Associate Professor in the Crawford School of Public Policy at The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia. Email: <[fiona.yap@anu.edu.au](mailto:fiona.yap@anu.edu.au)>.

---

*Asian Survey*, Vol. 56, Number 1, pp. 78–86. ISSN 0004-4687, electronic ISSN 1533-838X. © 2016 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: 10.1525/AS.2016.56.1.78.

party.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, the pendulum swings for the president delivered opposite effects for the legislature: while the year began with some promise for the legislative parties, both Saenuri and the opposition New Politics Alliance for Democracy (NPAD) suffered as the president gained political footing. For Saenuri, fissures between pro-Park supporters and the non-Park constituency hardened to undermine party-building, as tussles between the executive and the legislature mounted. On at least two key policy issues that laid the foundations for a stronger party—the revision of the National Assembly Act, which gave legislators the authority to demand changes to executive decrees and legislation, and the nomination reform process—non-Park constituents suffered devastating setbacks as Park’s preferences took hold. For the opposition NPAD, the factional fights that underlay the resounding and embarrassing by-election losses—three to Saenuri and one to an independent in Gwangju, a traditional NPAD stronghold—would fuel splits and defections and further threaten its viability.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, even where the opposition and public were in accord, such as on tough anti-corruption legislation or challenging the government’s policy of “correcting” history textbooks to whitewash pro-Japanese activities during the colonial era or the country’s experience with military dictatorship, the opposition remained stymied in its bid to build momentum against the government or augment its own standing.<sup>3</sup>

Amid these struggles, civil society’s burden to keep its social, political and economic concerns on the agenda intensified, as illustrated by the bungled government response to the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) epidemic and the continued foot-dragging in the probe of the 2014 Sewol ferry disaster that killed 304, mostly children. And, in the foreign relations arena, the country continued its tussles with Japan on the issue of historical memory, even as a real battlefield emerged with North Korea.

1. *The Kyunghyang Shinmun*. July 24, 2015. “Why are we afraid of the President? Because she’s the Queen of Elections!” <[http://english.khan.co.kr/khan\\_art\\_view.html?artid=201507241744587&code=710100](http://english.khan.co.kr/khan_art_view.html?artid=201507241744587&code=710100)>.

2. *Korea Herald*. May 8, 2015. “NPAD hit by factional fight.” <<http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150508001034>>.

3. *Korea JoongAng Daily*. January 22, 2015. “Saenuri promises tax refund in May.” <<http://korea.joongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=2999975&cloc=joongangdaily/home|top>>.

## DOMESTIC POLITICAL BATTLES

The battle over the political direction of South Korea may be encapsulated as the struggle between the executive and the legislature, and the conflicts of party-building for the legislative parties. South Korea's presidentialized parties, where the executive-leader has "considerable independence in the electoral and governing arenas," provide few incentives for presidents to shift focus away from their personal agendas to the parties.<sup>4</sup> It is no surprise, then, with pending elections, that tensions between executive priorities and legislative stature degenerated into open sparring.

### Executive Fights to Keep Priorities

President Park had scarcely completed her 2015 New Year address to set the tone for South Korea's economic stimulation, social renewal and political revival before national attention reverted to the scandal on leaked documents from the Blue House. This quickly morphed into influence-peddling concerns that upstaged her efforts to keep her aides out of political frays.<sup>5</sup> To make matters worse, even before the ebbing of the "doorknob" scandal, an allegory of how then-Chief of Staff Kim Ki-choon and three key aides, Presidential Secretaries Lee Jae-man, Jeong Ho-seong, and Ahn Bong-geun, control access to the president, the Park government was drawn into another skirmish. This time, it was a corruption scandal that implicated key members of the government, including newly appointed Prime Minister Lee Wan-koo, recently resigned Chief of Staff Kim and his replacement, Lee Byung-kee. The trio were named in a suicide note, reportedly penned by tycoon Sung Wan-jong, chair of Keangnam Enterprises, as recipients of bribes in a high-profile corporate corruption investigation.<sup>6</sup> Notwithstanding, the president resolutely refused to dismiss her aides,

4. Robert Elgie, 2011. "Presidentialism, Parliamentarism, and Semi-Presidentialism: Bringing Parties Back In." *Government and Opposition* vol 46 no 2: 392–408; D. J. Samuels and M. S. Shugart. 2010. *Presidents, Parties, Prime Ministers: How the Separation of Powers Affects Party Organization and Behavior*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

5. *Korea Joongang Daily*. January 13, 2015 "Park refuses to shuffle her staff." <<http://korea.joongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=2999589&cloc=joongangdaily|home|top>>.

6. *Korea Joongang Daily*. April 11, 2015. "Blue House sucked into scandal." <<http://korea.joongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3002985&cloc=joongangdaily|home|top>>.

prompting criticism that she is “out of touch” as well as huge declines in her job approval.<sup>7</sup>

Notwithstanding record low approvals, stark poll numbers and political pundits who all but called the elections for the NPAD, the ruling party swept three of the four contestable seats in the April 29 by-elections. The come-from-behind wins reinforced President Park’s reputation as the “queen of elections.”<sup>8</sup> More problematically, this turned the tide against the rising non-Park faction of the Saenuri Party that had started to gain political standing independent of the president. Park suffered another hit with the government’s mishandling of the MERS crisis, with her approvals dropping to 29%. The South Korean public was clearly frustrated at the lack of a lead agency for the epidemic as well as at Park’s delay in taking charge of the efforts that needed 69 days to contain the outbreak. A total of 36 persons were killed and 7,000 quarantined in their homes.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, the non-Park faction of Saenuri did not recover its early momentum to stand apart from the president.

### Legislative Parties Struggle Uphill for Party-building

Studies identify at least three fundamental roles for political parties: (1) as vehicles to mobilize support for elections; (2) as political pillars encapsulating regularized patterns, such as programmatic political contestation rather than personalistic politics or candidate-centered politics; and (3) to undergird executive-legislative relations to frame political performance.<sup>10</sup> The parties in the legislature—in particular, the ruling Saenuri Party and the opposition NPAD alliance—pursued party-building intently across these three roles

7. *Kyungbyang Shinmun*. January 12, 2015. “The President ‘disobeys’ the people: Refuses to shuffle presidential staff.” <[http://english.khan.co.kr/khan\\_art\\_view.html?artid=201501131709217&code=710100](http://english.khan.co.kr/khan_art_view.html?artid=201501131709217&code=710100)>.

8. *Kyungbyang Shinmun*. July 24, 2015. “Why are we afraid of the President? Because she’s the Queen of Elections!” <[http://english.khan.co.kr/khan\\_art\\_view.html?artid=201507241744587&code=710100](http://english.khan.co.kr/khan_art_view.html?artid=201507241744587&code=710100)>.

9. *Korea Joongang Daily*. “MERS outbreak is finally over, says government.” <<http://korea.joongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3007180&clcc=joongangdaily|home|top>>; *Yonhap News Agency*. June 19, 2015. “Park’s approval rating hits all-time low over MERS outbreak.” <<http://english.ynhnews.co.kr/national/2015/06/19/68/0301000000AEN20150619003600315F.html>>.

10. See, for instance, Russell Dalton and Steven Weldon. 2007. “Partisanship and Party System Institutionalization.” *Party Politics* vol 13: 179–196; O. Fiona Yap. 2006. “Agenda Control, Intraparty Conflict, and Government Spending in Asia: Evidence from South Korea and Taiwan.” *Journal of East Asian Studies* vol 6: 69–104.

with varying degrees of disappointment, unable to balance the executive's political strength.

The rise and fall of party-building in Saenuri for the year may be marked in three stages: early in the year with the issue of presidential-staff accountability, mid-year over the revision of the National Assembly Act and in the last quarter with the nomination reform process. The non-Park elements of the ruling party spotted a promising start in the beginning of the year when President Park's shielding of her presidential aides saw her approval plummet, even in her strongholds of Daegu and North Gyeongsang.<sup>11</sup> However, the by-elections success quickly extinguished the light on the non-Park faction; by May, Saenuri's support of the National Assembly Act's revision, which the president subsequently vetoed, led to a tense standoff between the president and non-Park faction, even though the latter had also negotiated for opposition passage of the pension reform, a key initiative of the president. The stand-off was resolved in the president's favor in two ways: by the resignation of the Saenuri floor leader, Yoo Seung-min, a non-Park constituent, and through the ruling party's boycott of parliamentary proceedings. Both political gestures highlighted the impotence of the ruling party in the legislature and undermined its already-low standing.<sup>12</sup> October witnessed another notable clash, this time between the president and non-Park Saenuri party chair, Kim Moo-sung, over the adoption of open party nominations for the elections. Although President Park had pledged to reform the nomination process as a presidential candidate in 2012, she later demurred. The conflict was defused in favor of the executive, when Kim conceded that not all nominations have to be open primaries; once again, the president's will was asserted, albeit at considerable cost to the party—and chair's—stature.<sup>13</sup>

If the situation looked bad for the ruling party in the legislature, it was immeasurably worse for the main opposition NPAD alliance, which repeatedly struggled but failed to contain the infighting that threatened to tear it asunder. The battle by two political heavyweights for the chair of the NPAD alliance in

11. *Korea Joongang Daily*. January 29, 2015. "Park's approval rating falls to 29.7%." <<http://korea.joongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3000254&cloc=joongangdaily|home|newlist>>.

12. *Kyungbyang Shinmun*. July 7, 2015. "Ruling party betrays the sovereign people by boycotting a parliamentary session." <[http://english.khan.co.kr/khan\\_art\\_view.html?artid=201507071737337&code=790101](http://english.khan.co.kr/khan_art_view.html?artid=201507071737337&code=790101)>.

13. *Kyungbyang Shinmun*. July 10, 2015. "Cheong Wa Dae and pro-Park member change tactics: Turning Kim Moo-sung into a "vegetable" leader instead of ousting him." <[http://english.khan.co.kr/khan\\_art\\_view.html?artid=201510071905297&code=710100](http://english.khan.co.kr/khan_art_view.html?artid=201510071905297&code=710100)>.

February—Representative Moon Jae-in, opposition presidential nominee in 2012 and leader of the pro-Roh Moo-hyun faction, and Park Jie-won, leader of the pro-Kim Dae-jung faction—was probably a signal of things to come. Moon’s successful election as chair did little to reduce the intraparty feuding for control; as a result, notwithstanding poor approvals for the president and the ruling party, the NPAD managed to snatch defeat from sure victory, losing all the seats in the by-election contest. To compound matters, party officials openly feuded over whom to blame for the losses, trading insults on social media and falling further in the public’s estimates. Veteran politicians resigned from party posts or left the party to form new opposition blocs ahead of the 2016 elections.<sup>14</sup> Although the NPAD has since constituted a reform committee and introduced changes to the party structure, the infighting has not ceased, raising serious questions about NPAD’s viability in 2016.<sup>15</sup>

#### CIVIL SOCIETY’S STRIFE

Importantly, in the midst of these political conflicts—which may foment voter disenchantment and discourage participation—South Korean civil society kept its concerns on the political agenda. In particular, the South Korean citizenry actively and angrily pushed back against the new tax settlement system, which—contrary to the government’s promises—imposed higher taxes on the middle and working classes.<sup>16</sup> And, they persisted with their demands for a clear resolution of the Sewol tragedy, including an independent investigative counsel. These fights were not without victories: thus, the tax reform debacle early in the year led to the government’s repeated apologies, refund of taxes and subsequent pledge to revise the tax code. Likewise, public opposition to the continuation of the country’s oldest nuclear reactor, Gori 1 in Busan, led to the government’s decision to close the plant.<sup>17</sup>

14. *Korea Herald*. April 30, 2015. “NPAD defector pushes new opposition bloc.” <<http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150430001112>>; *The Korea Herald*. September 22, 2015. “Opposition lawmaker defects to create new party.” <<http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150922000799>>.

15. *Korea JoongAng Daily*. September 24, 2015. “New reforms, strategies exacerbate NPAD divides.” <<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3009590&cloc=joongangdaily|home|newslist>>.

16. *Korea Herald*. January 26, 2015. “Park strives to placate public over tax burden.” <<http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150126001024>>.

17. *Korea JoongAng Daily*. June 13, 2015. “Bowling to pressure, gov’t will close Gori 1.” <<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3005341&cloc=joongangdaily|home|newslist>>.

Of these efforts, the most notable may remain the resistance by the Sewol families and their supporters against the government's mandate to probe the disaster, since the investigative committee would be put under the watch of two institutions implicated in the tragedy, the Oceans Ministry and the Coast Guard.<sup>18</sup> Public persistence—10,000-strong overnight protest rallies against the government's planned memorial, and protests against the government compensation as cover-up funds—paid off in a small victory: President Park authorized ferry salvage operations to further investigate the disaster, while pushing ahead with the probe.<sup>19</sup>

Clearly, the efforts by civil society to press the government for accountability comes at considerable expense; without a viable opposition to take aim and provide an electable alternative to the government, these civil society pressures may wane. An Amnesty International assessment that human rights deteriorated under Park's government may be a forewarning of the need for more balance of executive power to further social and political developments in the country.<sup>20</sup>

## GOVERNMENT BATTLES TO REVIVE THE ECONOMY

Economic revival remained front and center on the government's agenda as its struggles to revive the economy netted weak results: the annual growth for South Korea in 2014 was 3.3%, short of the 3.9% target, with inflation in the last quarter of 2014 at 0.8%, the lowest in 15 years, raising concerns over possible deflation.<sup>21</sup> In response, Park reshuffled her cabinet with three new appointments to economic-related ministries. Finance Minister Choi Kyung-hwan announced an increase in government spending of 3 trillion won (US\$ 2.6 billion), and a concurrent increase of 7 trillion won (US\$ 6.07 billion) in

18. *Korea Herald*. April 5, 2015. "Sewol families urge mandate repeal." <<http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150405000227>>.

19. *Korea Herald*. April 22, 2015. "Sewol salvage work to start in September." <<http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150422001020>>.

20. Kyunghyang Shinmun. February 26, 2015. "Amnesty International, 'Two years under Park Geun-hye, regressive trend in human rights.'" <[http://english.khan.co.kr/khan\\_art\\_view.html?artid=201502261837037&code=710100](http://english.khan.co.kr/khan_art_view.html?artid=201502261837037&code=710100)>.

21. *Korea JoongAng Daily*. January 11, 2015. "Inflation in Korea falls to less than 1%, lowest rate in 15 years." <<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=2999149>>; *Korea Herald*. January 25, 2015. See also "Slumping growth." <<http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150125000178>>.

investments from public companies and the private sector.<sup>22</sup> However, even before these stimuli had a chance to work, the MERS crisis set in and further devastated the economy.<sup>23</sup> To contain the slowdown from the health crisis, the government injected an additional 15 trillion won (US\$ 14 billion) in supplementary spending and passed 61 bills to ease foreign investment and equity funding.<sup>24</sup> The significant efforts finally saw an uptick in the economy in the third quarter of 2015: in contrast to the near-zero growth of the last five quarters, the Bank of Korea predicted 1% growth for the quarter, with an expected GDP growth of 2.8% for the year.<sup>25</sup> However, 0.6% growth in the last quarter pushed growth down to 2.6% for the year. Further, it is clear that much of the growth comes from the government stimulus, which will increase the deficit and correspondingly limit officials' ability to continue to pump-prime the economy. This may pose a problem for driving the "economic democratization" program, which promised reform of the chaebols, to eliminate unfair practices; this is among the more significant items on President Park's agenda, if the economy continues a slow-paced recovery.

## FOREIGN RELATIONS

Foreign relations continued to be uneven for the president, particularly with South Korea's immediate neighbors, Japan and North Korea. Still, on the broader diplomatic front, President Park extended relations with the Middle East and also agreed to join the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as a founding member to smooth economic relations for the future. And, South Korea also agreed to the U.S. deployment of the Terminal

22. *Korea Joongang Daily*. March 21, 2015. "Choi brings forward some spending for stimulus." <<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3002171>>.

23. The MERS crisis saw South Korea with the world's second most MERS patients, after Saudi Arabia, due primarily to the slow and bungled government response in identifying the first MERS patient and the hospitals affected. Koreans deserted favorite outdoor pastimes, avoiding malls, theaters and even baseball games. The domestic economy took a huge hit as small and medium-sized enterprises in the tourism, accommodations and leisure industries suffered from the huge contraction in consumer spending.

24. *Korea Joongang Daily*. June 25, 2015. "Gov't to spend \$14 B extra budget." <<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3005833&clcc=joongangdaily|home|top>>. *Korea Joongang Daily*. July 8, 2015. "61 bills passed to boost economy." <[http://english.khan.co.kr/khan\\_art\\_view.html?artid=201509221854327&code=790101](http://english.khan.co.kr/khan_art_view.html?artid=201509221854327&code=790101)>.

25. *Korea Joongang Daily*. October 13, 2015. "Nation's economy finding its footing." <<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3010229&clcc=joongangdaily|home|newslist>>.



High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile system, marking another defense collaboration with the U.S. Also importantly, while tensions remained with South Korea's immediate neighbors, the year witnessed a thaw in relations.

In the case of Japan, although Park continued to press Prime Minister Abe Shinzo over the issue of Korean "comfort women" during World War II, the year saw some small progress. Bilateral Foreign Ministry meetings were held, with the first Korean foreign ministerial visit to Japan in four years. The 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations was celebrated. As a further signal, President Park softened her stance against holding formal one-on-one meetings with the Japanese executive, remarking in her Liberation Day Speech on August 15 that it was "high time" for the countries to move forward together.<sup>26</sup> Following the landmark South Korea-Japan agreement on comfort women in December, where Japan admitted responsibility and agreed to pay 1 billion yen (US \$8.3 million) in reparations to a foundation for surviving victims, President Park spoke on the telephone with Prime Minister Abe Shinzo about ways to improve bilateral ties.

North Korea's periodic provocative launches of missiles and artillery fire escalated to an actual artillery exchange, without casualties, by both sides on August 20.<sup>27</sup> However, while the artillery exchange was ground for concern, it was also instrumental in paving the way to for the resumption of high-level talks between the two Koreas that led to a six-point agreement in August to ease tensions and regularize discussions between the governments to improve North-South relations.<sup>28</sup> The subsequent successful North-South coordination of the reunion of families following the conflict was cause for cautious optimism that, out of the ashes, may rise a real possibility for smoother relations between the Koreas. It would be a firm, significant step toward President Park's goal of reunification.

26. *Korea Herald*. August 16, 2015. "Park likely to improve ties with Japan." <<http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150816000291>>.

27. *Korea JoongAng Daily*. August 22, 2015. "After heavy fire, North is urged to halt use of force." <<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3008230>>.

28. *Korea Herald*. August 25, 2015. "S. Korea seeks 'regular, systemic' talks with N. Korea." <<http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150825000759>>.